

so we'll come (we will find our way home)

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by [angelsdemonsducks](#)

Summary

No parent should have to bury their child. But Philza has, and still does, and it is difficult to break the habit.

The Egg is gone. Dream is in the wind. The losses have been counted, the prices paid. For the first time in a long time, the server is at peace.

Wilbur Soot lives.

So, then, what next?

(Or, vignettes of a community rebuilding itself, piece by weathered piece.)

Notes

I finished *careful son* six months ago today. I'm very glad to have finished this in time for that anniversary; this 'verse still means something very special to me, so I hope this addition doesn't disappoint!

If you happen to be here without having read *careful son*, I won't tell you that you have to go read it first lmao, because that is definitely a time commitment. But I will say that this will make more sense if you do, and you should take note either way that this takes place in a canon divergent au from just after the Disc War Finale.

Title comes from 'Carry On' by fun. Please mind the tags for content warnings! And also don't feel like you have to read 19k in one sitting; there's plenty of natural places to pause.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

i.

There is too much of himself in Snowchester.

There is too much of himself in the walls that surround it, walls screaming at a pretense of safety because no wall is ever high enough to keep the rest of the world out. There is too much of himself in the little houses, in the little docks, in the little podium, in how everything is simple and quaint and practical, because practicality is all he knows and simplicity the most important factor in keeping a secret. There is too much of himself in the flag, in the colors that mean something and the diamond for the home that he lost, for the home that once was and never will be again. There is even too much of himself in the snow; the cold is pretty and innocent and deceptive, right up until you lose your balance. So is he.

That's something he learned. That he became. And though he wishes he could go back, to let this go, he doesn't know how.

Forward is the only way. He can only look ahead of himself. Can only walk in one direction.

Showing Snowchester to Wilbur is dangerous, in a way, because Wilbur is and always has been very perceptive. Too perceptive, sometimes, and prone to perceiving things that aren't actually there, when he gets lost in his own head. Once, Tubbo didn't understand that. Once, he thought that Wilbur was faultless, that Wilbur was perfectly in control, that Wilbur would never let him down.

And then, Wilbur made him president of a crater. Of ashes.

Some scars still ache.

Showing Snowchester to Wilbur is dangerous, in a way, but he does it anyway, because Wilbur is here now, is alive again, is going to stay that way as far as he can tell, and his feelings on Wilbur are many and complicated, but above all else, he wants him here. Wants him in his life, as risky a prospect as that might be. And Wilbur has changed—is changing, will change—and this time, it is for the better. There is not so much death in his eyes. There is no clinging scent of gunpowder. He no longer holds himself as though the slightest bit of warmth will burn him up.

He would say that Wilbur is like he was in L'Manberg, the early days, but that's not right either. He still remembers what Ghostbur said to him. About crying into his pillow. Funny, that he never really considered the implications of that until far later.

He shows Snowchester to Wilbur. He points out the houses and the docks and the tunnel that heads to the mainland, and shows him the view from which the prison still stands in the distance. Not for much longer, maybe. There's talk about tearing it down. He doesn't know how to feel about that.

There's no one to put in it, not anymore. Hopefully, there won't be again. But there could be, sometime. Perhaps he just doesn't like the removal of the option.

He shows Wilbur the flag. Wilbur smiles, and asks him what it means. He explains, and the flicker of pain in Wilbur's eyes when he mentions L'Manberg is one that is shared. There is a little bit of vindication, in that.

They are standing atop the walls when Wilbur speaks again. He is leaning fairly heavily on his cane. Tubbo will find them a place to sit down soon. He won't say anything about it, as Wilbur doesn't tend to appreciate when attention is drawn to it, but Tubbo understands that sort of thing. He can be patient, about this. They are two of a kind when it comes to showing perceived weakness.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur says.

"What for?" he replies.

Wilbur frowns. He's not looking at him, but rather, out across the water, toward the docks and beyond. Tubbo wishes he wouldn't. If they're going to have a serious conversation, he'd rather like Wilbur to be looking at him as they do.

"I shouldn't have done what I did," he says. "Made you president like that. Knowing what I was going to do. And even if I hadn't been about to—well."

"Blow it sky high?" Tubbo provides, somewhat dryly. Wilbur winces, but he doesn't regret it. He of all people is allowed to prod at that. Especially because he's not really sure where the rest of this is going.

"Blow it sky high," Wilbur agrees. "Even I hadn't been planning to do that, I shouldn't have put it all on your shoulders. I should have known better. The pressure of that position, it never should have had to be you, and I shouldn't have asked it of you. No matter how long I thought it would or wouldn't last."

"Because it did last," he says. "We rebuilt." *And then I failed*, he doesn't say. *Everyone and everything, but Tommy most of all. And your legacy. Whatever the hell it was, by the end. I've never known what to make of it. Or you, for that matter. I wish things could be simple again.*

"You did," Wilbur says, tone unreadable.

"And then we didn't."

"And then you didn't."

L'Manberg is, unfortunately, dead. L'Manberg was destroyed, and all of its destroyers now walk free. Techno and Phil live in the tundra, and he has forgiven the both of them, because it is better to forgive than to allow himself to be consumed. He could be consumed, if he let himself, by the anger, by the grief, but it would be dangerous to allow it, so it's better to not be. And then, there is Dream, who is Dream but not, who is Dream as he was before, supposedly, back in the days when they were all friends and the war was a friendly scuffle,

something that snowballed and snowballed and spiraled and spiraled and cost far, far too much. There is Dream, who is a god now and not a demon, not possessed, free of corruption, and Tubbo knows corruption, stood in that room with the Egg whispering of power, so he will leave Dream alone, even as he builds his walls higher. Even as he holds no interest in friendship. Not with him. No matter where the fault lies.

And Wilbur is here. Wilbur is here, and sometimes he speaks with a snap in his voice and a light in his eyes, and sometimes he speaks with a different kind of snap and there is a different kind of light, but most days are better, and Wilbur is both the easiest and the hardest to forgive.

Wilbur has never quite been his brother. Not like he is Tommy's. But he is something. Shoes that he's never been able to fill, and a guiding hand that he never figured out how not to miss.

And after his destruction, after his finale, they rebuilt. There was never a funeral, because it is easier to mock a tyrant than to mourn a man who you couldn't understand, but they rebuilt. They rebuilt. And Tubbo still doesn't understand Wilbur, not entirely, but he knows enough to hope that Wilbur will see the sentiment.

There was good in L'Manberg. There was bad, but there was mostly good. There could have been more good, if they were allowed to keep it, if he hadn't failed to protect it, but there was good. There was good in L'Manberg, and there was good in Wilbur, and there still is, and Tubbo doesn't trust quite yet, can't allow himself, but he is glad that Wilbur is here. Glad that Wilbur came back, and glad that he didn't die.

"What about that building, there?" Wilbur asks, pointing. "You didn't show me that one."

He follows the direction of Wilbur's finger.

"Ah," he says. "That's just a factory. Nothing exciting in there."

Wilbur regards him. Too level, too perceptive. Always perceptive. Tubbo doesn't know why he's bothering with the subterfuge; Wilbur heard about the nukes. Heard about how Jack and Niki tried to kill Tommy with them.

He doesn't much like to think about Jack and Niki, and the empty house near his, and the way that he still can't bring himself to strike Jack from the list of citizens. Even though he should. Betrayal is funny like that. He never sees it coming. And he never reacts quite in the way he ought to. All the walls in the world can't seem to stop that hurt.

Better to try and lock it all down instead. Focus on what he can do. A plan made of actions rather than hypotheticals.

Nukes. Bigger walls. What has any of that ever amounted to, in the end?

"Tubbo," Wilbur says.

"Wilbur," he returns. And under the surface, there is, *don't push me on this*.

He thinks Wilbur hears it.

The thing is, he forgot a long time ago what it was to feel safe. It might have been during the first war, but if it wasn't, it was definitely during the Manberg days, the peering over his shoulder and the lying and the mistrust and the words that fell from Schlatt's mouth and landed like barbed wire. The fireworks.

The nukes are not enough to make him feel safe. But they are enough to make him feel safer, and that is something. That is something, to know that he can look a threat in the eyes, finger poised over the button, and say, *try it*. That should it come down to it, he can defend himself to the last. He can, at the very least, take out a threat alongside himself. He has that power. He has power.

He is not weak. He never will be again.

And he will not hear what Wilbur has to say on this. Wilbur gave up that right a long time ago. Perhaps some day he will get it back. But as much as Wilbur changes, he does, too—is changing, will change. He thinks that perhaps he has become someone that Wilbur does not really know, despite the fact that Wilbur laid so much of the foundation.

He is someone that even he does not know, some days. And nothing is the same.

You know that, he doesn't say. *You see it. You and I aren't the same, and me and Tommy aren't the same, and this server isn't the same, and I haven't known peace long enough to believe it will stay.*

"I'd like to think you won't need them," Wilbur says eventually. "Just be careful."

"Boss man," he says, "I'm always careful."

That, at least, is not a lie.

Wilbur hums, a skeptical sort of sound. The snowfall makes it look as if all of his hair is white, and not just parts of it.

"If we're lucky, we might not have to be so much, anymore," Wilbur says, and the *we*, all of the things that are implied in that, that hits in a way that Tubbo wasn't expecting. Because he remembers what Wilbur was like. In the days of the ravine, and even earlier. Ever since the Final Control Room. There were seeds planted in all of them, that day. A path laid out. Tubbo's never believed in destiny, not really, but it's easy to look back and see exactly why everything happened the way that it did.

But Wilbur says *we*, and there's something in that, something of trying let go and move on and be better than what their circumstances made them, and what they made of each other, and what they made of themselves. Wilbur says *we*, and it's a declaration of trust and another olive branch extended between them, and Tubbo doesn't particularly believe in the strength of branches, but maybe he can tentatively start to lay down some roots.

Wilbur says *we*, and Wilbur knows exactly what he's doing with that, the charismatic bastard. But it's nice that he's putting faith in words again. It's the Wilbur he used to know better.

And that Wilbur is gone, but so is the Tubbo that Wilbur used to know, too, and he's not opposed to trying again. Would be a shame if he were, really, after everything. After Dream and the Egg and losing some people and regaining others, or diving in front of Tommy like it was the easiest thing in the world and then watching as Wilbur died and then came back to them once again, the ghost of a tyrant meeting his eyes and telling him he deserved better.

And, well. Alright then. He'll have better. He'll take better.

Maybe he's finally going to be allowed better.

He takes Wilbur into his house, and they make hot chocolate, and when Tommy shows up later, he whines at them for not sharing, and Tubbo feels warm, and he thinks Wilbur does too.

ii.

For the first month after the Egg is destroyed, she does not see the light of the sun.

She has her city, after all. Her city is deep underground. Her city is abandoned, full of ghosts that never saw it and ghosts that living people deposited like the worst sort of present. Her city is empty except for her, and then Jack, because despite it all, she can't turn Jack away. He's still the closest thing she has to a friend, and there is still something in her that sees someone hurting and feels the urge to fix it. Something in her that still wants to help, that still thinks herself capable of it, even though she proved a long time ago that maybe her hands are better for burning and for blood.

In a way, she is composed of two selves. The first is the self who came to L'Manberg, who set up a bakery and fed her friends, who was left behind and forgotten, who was held captive in her home and in a dank prison, who failed to see that there was anything to heal in the first place, who was left to pick through the wreckage and wonder what went wrong and wasn't even told that her best friend killed himself until she saw his phantom dripping blue.

The second self came after that day. The second self came after she burned the tree. Tried to kill Tommy. Joined with the Egg, its whispers promising her that finally, *finally*, she would be seen, that she would reclaim what should have been hers, never mind the fact that she didn't know, anymore, what exactly that was.

She told herself that the second self was stronger. She thinks that she was wrong.

There are so many ghosts in her city. Ghosts, and Jack, who might as well be one. She doesn't know how to help him, other than to let him stay. He needs a place. She can give him one.

She has nothing else to give. It's all burned up.

She stays in her city and travels by the nether, and doesn't venture into the Greater SMP except for when she's sure that no one else will be around. She doesn't want to be around people. She doesn't know how to be around people. She burned L'Mantree and tried to kill Tommy and let the Egg into her mind with barely any resistance at all, and now she feels hollow inside, used up. She doesn't know what she's supposed to do.

She visits Wilbur, and that seems to make it worse, so she doesn't do it again. She doesn't know how to feel about him, either. Wilbur was her friend, and then he changed, and then he destroyed everything about this server that she'd loved—destroyed *himself*—and then he came back and didn't come to find her, and now he's a bit closer to the friend she once had, but different. More hurt. More scarred. Or perhaps just less prone to hiding the hurt. More open about not being the mask that he created for himself, the pressure and the expectations and the fearless leader that he couldn't become to his own satisfaction or to others'.

The mask she never really knew was there.

She doesn't know what to do with that. Is it her fault, for not seeing through the front, or is it his for not being the person she thought he was?

She doesn't know.

But eventually, the ghosts in her city drive her forth. The ghosts, and Jack. Jack isn't doing well. Jack almost killed Tubbo. Would have, if he didn't have a totem. Jack spends most of his days holed up in his room, and all she can manage to do is try to take the alcohol away from him when he's not aware enough to notice.

And maybe he doesn't deserve help. Maybe she doesn't deserve help. After what they've done, and still might do—she thinks of Tommy, and even now, her anger is an inferno in her chest, and she's only just now beginning to understand that perhaps Tommy isn't who she should be angry at at all.

Maybe they don't deserve help. But there's something in her, something small and something wounded, that tells her to try. It speaks to her in a voice that wore a blue coat and baked food for her friends and was seen and was loved and wasn't ever left behind. So she goes out, and the server looks different, and some buildings are gone and there are new ones there, and there are no red vines, and her feet take her down the Prime Path and to—

Puffy's.

She stops just short of the door.

What is she doing?

It's been so long since she talked to Puffy. Since their—she's not even sure how to label it, at this point. It could have been something. Could have turned into something. But she doesn't think it could, now. Not after everything. Not after what she's done, almost did, might still do.

She feels old and bitter. She shouldn't have come here.

She turns to leave. But Puffy is standing on the path behind her, only a few meters away.

“Niki?” she says.

Oh, Prime.

“Puffy,” she says. “Hello.”

Puffy takes a step forward. She does not move, feet glued to the spot.

“It’s been a long time since anyone’s seen you,” Puffy says. “How are you doing?”

“I’m alright,” she says. The lie scorches her tongue, but she became used to that a long time ago. She barely notices. “I’ve been keeping myself busy. I guess I wanted to stay out of the way.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Puffy says. “We all know what the Egg did. Bad and Ant and the rest are around, doing their best to help. And to get better, too. Things are getting better. You’re—” But then, Puffy pauses. There’s a shadow in her eyes. And in that moment, Niki knows that she knows exactly what she and Jack tried to do to Tommy. The whole server knows, probably. And this will be a sticking point, even if nothing they did while under the Egg’s influence is.

Part of her wants to scream. She can imagine just what she’d say, what howling storm she’d give voice to: *Tommy is everything that is wrong with this place, can’t you see? Everywhere he goes, there is destruction and death, and he never seems to suffer for it. He comes out the other side fine, and it’s the rest of us who have to piece everything back together. I was just trying to stop it all before bad things happened again.*

The thing is, she doesn’t know if she believes that anymore. Even in the privacy of her own mind, it rings without substance.

“I don’t think I’m staying long,” she says, and she can’t quite interpret the expression on Puffy’s face at that, whether it’s relief or disappointment or some mixture of both. “I just wanted—I just wanted advice.”

“Okay,” Puffy says. She doesn’t step forward again. The distance is agonizing, despite the fact that anything they might once have had is long gone. No more flower shops. No more picnics. No more fluttering hearts, and the idea that maybe there was something on this server worth staying for after all. “I can do advice.”

The words stick in her throat for a moment. But she came all this way, so she has to try, even if Puffy’s likely to turn her away.

“Jack’s not doing well,” she says. “I don’t know how to help him.”

Puffy is silent for a very long moment.

“First rule of things like this,” she says, eventually, “is that you’ve got to help yourself before you can help anyone else. You’re no help if you don’t have your own shit sorted.” There is

another gleam in her eyes, and Niki realizes, with more surprise than she should, maybe, that Puffy is angry. There is a barely concealed tremor in her voice when she speaks again. “Are you sorry for what you—what you did? Tried to do?”

She doesn’t have to elaborate.

“I don’t know,” Niki admits, and it’s awful and wrenching and still so, so very bitter. She’s tired of being bitter. She’s tired of being like this. She’s just tired. But she doesn’t know how not to be anymore, and standing in front of Puffy like this, feeling all the weight of her judgement, she feels like she’s dangling off a cliff’s edge, and her grasp is slipping, and she can’t see the bottom, can’t see where she will land, whether there is anything to break her fall. And she has no power left to pull herself up.

“Okay,” Puffy says, and she’s definitely angry. Definitely—on Tommy’s side. But she doesn’t shout or go for a sword or even walk away. “Well, why don’t you try figuring that out first and go from there?”

She swallows.

“Okay,” she says, and wishes she didn’t sound so weak. She’s not weak. She burned down L’Mantree. She took control of her life. But she’s so tired, and wondering if maybe none of that was strength at all. “Okay, I—I think I’ll go, now. Bye, Puffy.”

Puffy steps aside to let her move down the Prime Path, back the way she came. Back to the nether portal. Back to her city.

But Puffy calls after her.

“My door’s open,” she says. “It’s open for everyone. You just have to want to try. It has to start with you.”

She nods, wordless. There’s nothing she can think to say.

Later, she starts watching Tommy.

She doesn’t set out to. It sort of just happens. Tommy’s building a hotel, right on the Prime Path, just a little ways down from his house, and she sees him there one day and sticks around, and thinks about all the construction accidents that could happen to someone. Beams falling, blocks broken out from underfoot, lava inexplicably placed somewhere it’s not supposed to be.

She realizes she could do it.

Tommy’s not alone all the time. Sam seems to be helping him, and others show up a lot, too. Tubbo, mostly, and Ranboo. Even Technoblade, once, and Phil a few times. And Wilbur. She tries the most to stay out of sight when it’s Wilbur, but he spots her a few times, and the way he places himself between her and Tommy isn’t subtle enough to go unnoticed. Nor are the glances he shoots in her direction. Something hard, something firm, and something that says that maybe he hasn’t really forgiven her, for what she attempted.

That's alright, because she doesn't think she's forgiven him, either. For everything. It's all so complicated.

But sometimes, Tommy is alone. He's not even wearing armor. He must feel safe. She could walk up and—

She walks up.

"Hello, Niki," he says, when he notices her standing there. There's a little bit of wariness in his tone. But not much. No open hostility—though with Tommy, that could change at any moment.

"Hi, Tommy," she says.

"What, um," he says. "what brings you by?"

"What are you working on?" she asks, even though she already knows. She doesn't have a plan. She doesn't know what she's doing. Maybe she's never known, and that's terrifying.

Tommy brightens.

"Well, it's a hotel, innit?" he says. "Gonna be fucking sick when it's done. Sam's helping me out, except we're doing this thing, he's being Sam Nook, and it's like it's, do you know that game, the one where you're on an island, and you find, you find shit, and there's terraforming, and I'm so very good at it, but anyway, this is gonna be my hotel. And the whole server can come and stay here, for a very small and completely reasonable fee, of course, and everybody will look at it and say, wow, Tommy, you are so good at building, here are all of my diamonds. You can stay here too, if you want. I dunno where you are these days."

He says it so simply. Like it means nothing.

Like she didn't—

"I tried to kill you," she says.

Tommy looks her in the eyes.

"I know," he replies, and sounds a little older than he should. His eyes are a little greyer.

"I tried to drop a nuke on your head," she presses, just in case he hasn't gotten it. "I wanted you to die."

"Yeah?" Tommy says. "Niki, and I'm not trying to make fun when I say this, but join the club."

She loses her voice entirely.

"See, the thing is, Niki, you're a bit of a wrong'un," Tommy says. He adjusts his hat. It's bright yellow. A hard hat, like construction workers wear. It's just slightly too big for his

head. “You tried to kill me, and that’s not poggers. But you didn’t, and I’m still here, and you know, if I tried to stay mad at everyone who had ever tried to kill me, I would have to be mad at a lot of people, and you know, that’s just a very long list to try and keep track of. And I get it, y’know. Why someone would—well. Why someone would *want* to. And I’m a big man who can take care of himself, so. I mean it’s really just not a big deal, actually.”

She doesn’t know why that makes her want to cry.

“So you can stay in my hotel once it’s done,” Tommy concludes, nodding sagely. “Might charge you extra, but that’s just business. I’m going to be such a good fucking businessman. I’ve got a suit and everything.”

“Jack’s sorry,” she blurts out. He stills.

“Yeah?” he says.

“He feels really bad,” she says. “Especially about Tubbo.” She doesn’t actually know if he feels guilty about trying to murder Tommy. Maybe not. But she knows he’s letting his guilt about Tubbo eat him alive.

“Good,” he says. “He should feel bad. He tries to touch Tubbo, I’ll fucking murder him myself, I will.” He cocks his head, regarding her. “So how about you tell him to come say sorry himself, if he really means it?”

“I’ll tell him,” she says, even though Jack is probably drunk to the point of incoherence right now. He usually is, even though the more he does it, the less it seems to actually help. Or even just distract him.

Tommy nods, still watching her. Like he’s waiting for something. She doesn’t think she can give him what he’s waiting for. Not yet.

But she knows what it is. And maybe it’s not entirely out of the question. Someday. Maybe even soon.

“I might take you up on that offer,” she says instead. “I live pretty far away. It might be nice to be closer to people again.”

Tommy grins at her, sharp and sure, and for a moment, it is months ago, and the walls rise high around them, and she is in her bakery surrounded by the scent of bread and there is flour under her fingernails instead of blood, and Tommy is sitting at the counter and telling her all about the prank he pulled on Tubbo, and the bell over her door jingles and Wilbur walks in, weary but smiling as he ruffles Tommy’s hair and takes a seat, and they’re all friends, and nothing bad is ever going to happen to any of them, and they are going to live in happiness and peace forever and ever.

“You do live out in the middle of nowhere, don’t you,” Tommy says, and the dream shatters. But the pieces remain. “Like a fucking loser hermit. You should come live here and pay me many diamonds.”

She manages to nod. And then, she turns to leave, her footsteps too quick to be considered casual, and when she looks back, Tommy is watching her leave, his half-finished hotel rising behind him. She doesn't look back again, even when she hears Wilbur's voice, distant and calling out a greeting to his brother.

She heads back to her city. She heads back to Jack. She goes into his room, and he's sitting on the floor, leaning against his bed, and there are too many beer bottles surrounding him, and he's unkempt and dirty and wearing the same clothes that he has been for the past week, but he's awake. He seems confused by her sudden presence, and by the way that she barged in without knocking or asking, but he's awake. Eyes shot through with blood, but mostly aware.

She kneels by his side.

"We have to be better, Jack," she says.

Jack blinks.

"The fuck does that mean?" he asks, words slurring.

"We can't keep on like this," she says. "I'm so tired of feeling this way. I'm tired of watching you destroy yourself. I'm tired of being like this. I'm tired of hurting. I'm tired of hurting other people. I think we need to try to get better."

Jack blinks again. He gropes for a bottle. She moves it outside of his reach, and he scowls at her.

"How the fuck d'we do that, then?" he asks.

"We get up," she says. "We try. We make—we make it up. What we did wrong, we make it up. We try and be better. That's all. We try."

She's half expecting an argument. But after a second, Jack's scowl slips from his face, and after another, he sighs.

"I'm tired of feelin' this way, too," he says. And he doesn't fight when she takes his hand, and for the first time in a long time, the flames within her die down, and she thinks that if she went out into the rain, she would be able to feel it.

Two weeks later, she starts baking again.

It was on a sunny morning that Dream died, and it is on another sunny morning that Sapnap decides to let him go.

Because here is the thing: he killed Dream. He drove a sword through his chest on that sunny morning, drove a sword through his chest and kept it there as he died, as the smoke crept out from under his mask and dissipated, as he breathed his last, as his hand came up and curled around Sapnap's around the hilt, and the hand went cold and the chest stopped moving, and any hope of reconciliation or change was gone and Sapnap would have to live with that. Would have to live with that and a promise fulfilled and the knowledge that killing his best friend and brother was the right thing to do.

But here is the other thing: he killed Dream, and some part of Dream died, but some part of Dream still lives. Is still out there somewhere, closer to the friend and brother that he knew than he ever thought possible, wearing the skin of a god but a familiar face. Dream died by his hand, but Dream still lives, and that knowledge burns in him, hotter even than his own flames and so, so much more treacherous.

There is a person that he allowed himself to be, by Dream's side. Destructive, angry, even cruel. He let terrible things happen, and when he finally took a stand to stop it, it felt like too little, too late. He could become that person again; he fears becoming that person again. If he stood with Dream like he used to, what would that make him? Nevermind that Dream was possessed, and then corrupted. Nevermind that he has no idea how much was truly Dream and how much wasn't, how much might have been different if there were no such thing as dreamons or corruption or the void leaning in too close. Nevermind that he has no idea, now, how Dream would have acted if it had all been normal.

The fact is, there is a person that he was and a person that he is, and he likes to think that the two are different, that the man who stands hand in hand with Karl and Quackity is not the one that attacked on Dream's behest. But that still leaves the question of what a sword does in peacetime, and what to do with the chance to go back to the way things were, as much as it's possible.

He does miss it. He misses the early days. Misses hanging out with Dream and George, the server new, just-formed, Dream's lips curling up in a wild grin as he talked about all the things they could do now that they had a home of their own. He misses the community house, the first one, the one that they built together. He misses knowing that they were inseparable, a team, that their bonds would never falter and that they'd have each other's backs. For then and for all time. That was how it was supposed to be.

He misses it. Misses them.

He talks to Karl and Quackity about it. He's glad that Karl and Quackity are here to talk about it; in the wake of everything, they've been sticking closer. Karl hasn't pulled one of his disappearing acts in weeks.

Quackity says, "You should do whatever makes you feel better, man. I mean, fuck Dream. I don't care if he was possessed or not, fuck Dream. But if it'll make you feel better to go after him, then go after him. Just don't leave us out of the loop. Don't be stupid about it."

Karl says, “You should do what feels right. But I think you should also be careful. What feels right isn’t always what is right. And you can spend a lot of time chasing the past. That doesn’t mean you’ll get to keep it, or that it’ll all turn out good in the end. Mostly I think that the present is what matters most.”

When they’re together, he holds both their hands. It’s not like the way it used to be. They’re different people. They are not Dream and George. But that’s okay; he likes that they’re different, likes that they’re in his life, that they’re engaged and they’re going to get married, and now that the Egg stuff is over and done with, he might even get to invite his dad to the wedding.

He does talk to Bad. Bad doesn’t have much to offer, and that’s fair. He and Skeppy are mostly focusing on recovering, and they’re so joined at the hip that a lot of the time, he feels like he’s interrupting. Considering that Skeppy was—inside of the Egg all along, or something. He’s not going to risk asking how that worked, for multiple reasons.

But when he asks Bad for advice, Bad looks at him with an expression that’s a bit unfamiliar in its sheer amount of weariness and regret, and Bad tells him, “Do whatever your heart tells you. I think that’s the most important thing.”

“But what if my heart doesn’t know?” he asks.

“Then stick close to the people who love you until your heart figures it out,” Bad answers, like it’s easy. “Don’t make the same mistakes I did.”

There is really nothing more he can say to that. And no argument he wants to make. Bad is healing, but it’s going to take more time. Eventually, hopefully, he’ll be up to the usual chaos. But not yet. Right now, Bad is tired, and Bad is regretful, and Bad needs time. They all do.

He takes the advice. He sticks close to the people who love him, and they stick close to him, and around them, the server starts to rebuild. The gates of Eret’s castle are kept open. Nature begins to creep into the gaping hole in the ground where L’Manberg once was, and the vines are green and not red. Tommy starts to build a hotel right on the Prime Path, and there is more of the old light in his eyes than Sapnap has seen since before Schlatt took the presidency. Everyone stands straighter, without such a weight on their shoulders, and conversations flow easier. Fights get resolved with little issue. Old grievances rise to the surface, and then start to heal.

He talks to a few others.

He asks Tommy what he thinks. Tommy doesn’t seem to want to talk about it much, but he does pause in—Sapnap’s not entirely sure what he’s doing, actually, but it appears to be a minor act of arson, which is further evidence that the server’s on the right track again, if Tommy’s back to committing petty crime. He’s pretty sure that Ranboo is the one working on this little build, so he doesn’t have a stake in it.

“I don’t like that he’s out there,” Tommy says. “I sort of fucking hate it. If he comes anywhere near me, I’ll—I’ll stick him with a sword, is what. But I dunno, if he’s out there—out there getting better or some shit, then I think that’s up to you, whether you want anything

to do with him or not. I fucking don't. But all of the dreamon bullshit makes it fucking complicated. So you've got to—I dunno, you've got to decide. If it were up to me, I'd say go and fucking murder him. I don't believe in self-improvement, personally. I'm not the self-improvement sort, and what he did—" His voice breaks, and he looks at the flint and steel in his hands. "I don't want him. Not ever. Not even if we *could* actually be friends again, as in for real, because I wouldn't ever be able to trust that. And it wouldn't, I think it just simply wouldn't be good for me, and I'm trying to do things that are good for me. But you have a choice."

Tommy then lights Ranboo's build—he can't even tell what it's supposed to be, but it's made of wood—on fire. Ranboo comes barreling down the Prime Path a moment later, complaining at the top of his lungs, and Tommy snarks back, and Sapnap thinks they're going to be alright.

He asks Wilbur, too, just for the sake of it. He's not the sort of person who goes to Wilbur for advice, and they are not friends and never will be. There's too much between them. But he has respect for the way that Wilbur is clearly trying to live a better life now, because he's trying to do the same, and maybe Wilbur sees that in him, because when he stops by the little house Wilbur has by the sea—piecemeal and honestly, ugly-looking—Wilbur doesn't bring up any of their baggage.

"I dunno why you're asking me, man," Wilbur says, and seems to revel in saying it. In not having an answer, and not having to provide one. "I don't give a fuck about what Dream does as long as he doesn't hurt Tommy or Tubbo or anyone else. And I don't give a fuck about what people do with Dream, either. He didn't even want me to tell you lot that he was alive, but fuck that, you know?" Wilbur's gaze sharpens; he has kept all of his old intensity. "If you're asking me if he could change, then maybe. He seemed like he might want to try. I don't know if that means he'll come back or not, and I don't know if that means he should. Maybe it would be better for everyone if he didn't. But I can only speak myself, not for you."

That last is pointed. Sapnap receives the message.

His heart is still undecided. He has kept close, has looked for the advice of others, but at the end of the day, Wilbur is right. This is his choice. No one else can take that from him, and no one else should.

"What do you want to do?" he asks George.

"I dunno," George answers. "It wouldn't really be the same, would it?"

"No," he says. "I guess not."

They were three, and now they are two, and now Sapnap is part of a different three. That's the way it is. And George is right; no matter what he chooses, it won't ever be the same again.

So he comes to a decision on a sunny morning.

Quackity and Karl are still asleep, tangled up in their bed. Quackity is snoring, lightly, his face always so much more peaceful in rest. Karl is present, and for now, that's more than enough. He slips out onto the porch of the house they're currently sharing, and idly toys with plans for something bigger, something greater than this. El Rapids is defunct, but there's nothing saying they can't move on to something else. As long as they stick with each other. They don't have to repeat the past. Any of it.

The sunrise is very nice from here. There are no weapons in his inventory, and he still doesn't quite know what a sword does in peacetime, but for once, his fingers don't itch to close around a hilt, and the crackling in his blood is a low and steady flame, and right now, that's enough too.

They're enough. And he's enough. And there's a future ahead of him, one that he won't reach if he clings to the past.

Because the past can't be reclaimed. Those quicksilver days of Dream's easy smile and teakettle laugh are gone. He can't get them back. And he thinks that trying would hurt him and everyone else around him, and he's tired of hurting and being hurt. He doesn't know what a sword does in peacetime, but he'd like to find out.

That means moving on.

If Dream comes back, he'll be waiting. Not with open arms, maybe, but he'll be waiting. To try, at the very least. Not to reclaim what they had, but to see if there's a chance for something new, somewhere under all the betrayal and hurt and pain of watching a best friend and a brother slip into something unrecognizable. Maybe there's room in his life for Dream, for a version of Dream that cares, that's sorry, that wants to make up for it all, truly and genuinely. But Sapnap can't spend time pursuing a dream that might not be real, and he can't keep chasing shadows. Can't recapture memories.

If Dream comes back, he'll be waiting. But if not, he's going to live.

So, it was on a sunny morning that Dream died, and it is on another sunny morning that Sapnap breathes in deeply, and lets him go.

iv.

Out in the desert, sitting next to an old friend that they cannot remember and yet know better than they know themselves, Eret explains the value of redemption.

"The thing about it is," they say, "is that forgiveness isn't a requirement, not really."

Their words only slur a little bit. They are good at holding their drink. So it's unfair, really, that Foolish has confiscated the wine bottle. Unfair, and they've told him so, loudly and at

length, but they've gotten tired of that, and the night is warm and clear and their head is full of thoughts, and Foolish is a very good friend.

"Y'know, I guess that's true," Foolish says musingly. "At the end of the day, it's just about being better, isn't it? Finding yourself a new path?"

They nod. Their hair is in their eyes. They're not sure where their crown has gotten off to, but they're sure Foolish knows. He keeps track of things like that. But they don't want to wear it right now, anyway. They don't like to wear it all that much these days. It's never done them any good. Maybe there won't be a need for it anymore. They were foolish—*ha*—to believe that that was the kind of power they wanted.

Power is good. They stand by that. They like to have power. But only if that power can help the ones they care about. Otherwise, there's no point to it at all.

"It is about that," they say. They hiccup, and then frown, looking at Foolish through a curtain of hair. It's getting very long. They think they like it that way. "It's—you do something wrong and then you realize it was wrong. But it's too late to fix it, and maybe it was a terrible mistake, but you still try. You have to try, you have to do something, but nobody owes you any forgiveness. And you know that. You just want to see if you can help them be happy again. You want to give back what you took from them."

"Did you manage to?" Foolish asks.

"I don't know," they say. "I tried. I tried for a very long time. I like the person I am now better than the person I was."

"Huh," Foolish says. "You know, I think the same thing about myself. Not that our glory days weren't cool and all, but it's nice, being peaceful. No more armies at my doorstep, no more smiting villages. I'd be game to do the wither thing again if you wanted, but overall, I'd say life's been pretty good. I like building."

"I like building too," they say. "And I like your builds. They're all so cool."

"Aw, thanks," Foolish says, and grins. "I like yours too. Though to be honest, I think you might try branching out in the material department a little bit. You use a lot of stone."

They frown at him. That is definitely rude. They decide to swat him on the arm for good measure.

"Tell that to me and my collection of pride flags," they say. "I made a rainbow out of *beacons*."

"You have killed so many withers," Foolish agrees. "I can't believe that's still your idea of a fun afternoon. Alright, I'll concede the point."

Mollified, they look for the wine bottle. But it's still on the other side of Foolish. Maybe if they caused a distraction of some sort, they could get to it. But then, maybe not; they're only lightly drunk, just enough to loosen their tongue and make the whole world feel a little bit

brighter. No more than that is needed, really. It's just them and Foolish and some wine, and they don't want to risk forgetting this. Not like they've forgotten so much else.

They frown again, thinking about the original topic.

"The thing about it is," they say, and glance up at the night sky. There are so many stars here. Foolish's base is the only player-created light for chunks and chunks, and the stars seem determined to make up that difference. They're beautiful. Sometimes, Eret thinks that they can hear them. "The thing about it is, that you don't need it, not really. But you want to be forgiven anyway. You want it, and it's selfish, but you want to gain back what you lost through your hubris. You want your friends, your family. You want them back. You wish you could have their trust back. Even if that's not in—what's the word. Inherent. Even if that shouldn't be your goal."

"Even if you don't know if you have a right," Foolish supplies, softly, and they nod.

"Yes," they say. "Even then. Redemption does not mean forgiveness. But forgiveness is the sweetest and most bitter thing in the world. And for so many of us, that's all we're looking for."

"I forgot you're a philosophical drunk," Foolish says.

"Am I?" they ask, and then remember that a better question would perhaps be, "Have I always been?"

There is so much about themselves, after all, that they do not know.

"Usually," Foolish says. "If you don't get completely hammered. Which happens more often than it should, since you, uh. You are not very good at holding your liquor."

"I am so."

"You are so not," Foolish insists. "But I've watched you run circles around kings."

They hum, discontented. "I am a king."

"So you've said," Foolish says. "But it sort of seems like you'd rather not be."

"For what it cost," they say, "no. I'd take it back, if I could." They stretch their hand toward the sky. But the stars are, as always, just out of reach. All they can do is trace their patterns, trail their fingertips against the heavens and pretend to know their warmth.

"But you can't," Foolish says. "You can only move forward. Try to find redemption, and ask for forgiveness."

"And when they give it to you," they say, "what then?"

"Then you accept it," Foolish says. "I guess I don't really know. There's not a whole lot of people out there who'd be giving me forgiveness. Most of them are dead. I guess maybe I could resurrect them. I don't know if that's in my skillset. I could try. But I don't think they'd

appreciate it all that much.” He shrugs. “But it seems to me like you’ve got a good thing going on here. There’s some good people. There’s some weirdos, but there’s some good people. So you accept their forgiveness, and bam! You’ve got your friends back.”

They sigh, and lean their head against Foolish’s shoulder. They’re not sure if they would do that if they were completely sober. They’re still trying to figure out where the boundaries are, in this friendship that every inch of them knows and yet does not remember. But for now, the night is clear and they are pleasantly buzzed, and Foolish is a very good friend.

“You make it sound simple,” they murmur.

“It’s not,” Foolish says. “But it’s simpler than I think a lot of people make it out to be.”

“And what of guilt?” they say. “Does that go away?”

“Not entirely, I don’t think,” Foolish says, “but it’s not good to dwell on it too much. That doesn’t help anybody. And that’s not what redemption’s about, is it?”

“No,” they say. “It’s not.”

They spend the rest of the night like that. With Foolish, comfortable and safe, and wondering at the meaning of it all.

They show Wilbur the museum, when they get the chance. It’s hard to catch him in the early days, after everything; he’s recovering, and everyone is recovering, and they are recovering, too. And just because the Egg is gone and Dream is gone—wherever Dream is, and however much of that god actually is Dream and not just power coalesced into a human-like shape—doesn’t mean that all is well and all is solved and all is forgiven. Wounds do not heal overnight, if they heal at all. But they have the chance, now, and so they do manage to show Wilbur the museum eventually, if for no other reason than because he should see it. Because so much of what is in here started with him.

It is a precarious thing, legacy. But the past is important, and Eret will preserve it where they can. That, too, is part of their redemption. History obliterates, but they will see the truth to light, if they are able, in all its human hope and folly.

Wilbur lays a hand on the van. Wilbur traces his hand along the wall of L’Manberg, glances at the original community house. He stops at the map—unfinished, always a work in progress—for a long moment. And he does step inside the Final Control Room, though not without a glance at them, both defiant and searching. Eret does not enter with him. Won’t, not unless they’re asked.

There is the unmistakable sound of chests opening and closing. Wilbur reemerges a moment later, and his grip on his cane is white-knuckled.

“I put it there quite some time ago,” they offer. They know what he has found. “I suppose I was hoping that it would be read someday, but I never expected it.”

Wilbur frowns. For a long moment, he doesn’t reply.

“Apologies don’t mean much,” he says, “if you don’t back them up. Otherwise, it’s just pretty words. No substance.”

They incline their head. “I know,” they say, and try to act as if their heart isn’t slamming against their ribs.

Wilbur steps forward. They resist the urge to retreat. They will not back down, not from this. At the very least, they know Wilbur does not hate them as he once did, as he was right to do. He trusted them with the second sword. He stayed in their castle. They have spoken, they two, of absolution and second chances, and Wilbur has had his own things to redeem himself for, and even if there cannot be true forgiveness or trust, they at least understand each other very well. If that is all they can have, then it is so much better than nothing, and it is so much better than Wilbur being dead.

Eret has their second chance. Absolution might be beyond their grasp. But they resigned themselves to that a long time ago.

Wilbur takes another step forward.

“I put you back in the song,” Wilbur says. “Like I said I would.”

It takes them a moment to realize what he means. And then, a moment remembered: Ghostbur’s voice airy and piping, and a casual promise made, and their own response, their tentative hope, and something floods their chest, something hot and impossible to name, and their eyes all of a sudden feel terribly wet.

“Oh,” they say.

“It’s just a song,” Wilbur says. “But I suppose it’s a legacy, too. And honestly, Eret, I still don’t know if you deserve to be part of it. But I don’t know if I deserve to be a part of it. It’s something I grapple with, and I don’t know if I’ll ever have a real answer. I’m not easily satisfied. Never satisfied, that’s me.” The frown fades into something else. Something that’s not a smile, and not even gentle. But it’s open. Honest. Maybe even a little bit welcoming.

“It feels like more than a song,” they say.

“I know,” Wilbur replies.

“Thank you,” they say.

Wilbur nods at him. The click of his cane resounds loudly as he leaves the museum, casting one last impossibly fond, impossibly regretful look at the camarvan before he goes. Eret finds themselves sitting inside, breathing slowly and carefully and thinking about different days. And days yet to come. Days that will be brighter, and will be better.

Friends. Family. There is no power in the world greater than having those. The crown weight heavily on their head, most days, and they can feel it even now. Soon they will be able to cast it off. Soon they will find that strength within themselves. And to move ahead. Onward. To shed guilt, to find redemption, to accept forgiveness, to regain trust.

Absolution. It might be beyond their grasp. But this feels something like it.

v.

Tommy starts to come by evidently for the sole purpose of building dirt penises in his yard.

It's not like they're hard to remove. They're dirt. A little bit of dirt can't defeat him. That would just be embarrassing. He'd like to think he hasn't quite reached that stage of his life yet. But it's the principle of the thing. Tommy comes by, treks through the nether and then through the snow, and he builds dirt penises in the yard, and sometimes he pets the dogs or says something outrageous or annoying or outrageously annoying, and then he leaves. Until the next time he comes back and inevitably does it all over again.

"I offered him space here," Phil reminds him. "Him and Wil and Tubbo, all of them. He's not doing any harm, Techno, let him have his—artwork."

"But Phil," he says, "Phil, my property value. It's tanking, Phil. I can't have dirt penises on my yard. They're not even made out of a stable buildin' material, they're just dirt!"

"He's testing you," Phil says. "You do know that, right?"

He pauses to listen to the screaming of Chat.

"I know," he says. "I just wish he'd test me with somethin' else."

It's not quite the truth and not quite a lie. He hasn't admitted it out loud yet, because Chat would never let him hear the end of it and that is definitely the only reason why, but he doesn't know what he's supposed to do with Tommy. He thought he knew, before the whole Egg thing went down. He was content to stay here with Phil for however long they remained on this server, and he was content to leave Tommy behind him. Forget about—forget about their childhood, forget about the gap-toothed gremlin child that begged him to teach him how to fight, forget about high-pitched needling and gifts given and turtle shell helmets.

He'd forget about all of it. Forget that they were brothers. Forget that they ever—or that he ever—or that he ever wanted—

He was betrayed, and that's that. Seen as a tool, time and time again, a weapon and nothing more. Once Tommy joined in, that was it. No more of that. He wouldn't have it. He'd forget their brotherhood, leave it behind just like Tommy seemed to want him to. And that would be that.

Being an only child wasn't so bad. He got Phil all to himself, which he saw as a total win about seventy percent of the time.

But then Wilbur showed up on his doorstep, alive again and eyes just as shadowed as they used to be. But then there was an Egg trying to mind-control everyone. But then Dream broke out of prison and decided to be a loser, as per usual. Wasted his favor and everything. Stupid of him. And then, not stupid at all, because he died.

Technoblade never dies. That's the phrase. He doesn't know what to do about it now that it's not true. Now that his lives on this server have been brought down to two. Now that the anvil dreams have been replaced with a vine around his neck, a sickening crack. And more often, an axe through his throat, as Tommy stared at him with wide eyes. His last words barely a whisper, urging Tommy to get the heck out of there.

Sometimes, though, he dreams that he doesn't die. Sometimes he dreams it's Tommy. And somehow, those are the worst ones of all.

Chat won't shut up about it. They only ease up when he goes to ring the bell. He rings his bell a lot, these days, hoping his god won't abandon him now that he's proven himself to be a liar.

Technoblade never dies. Except he did. For Tommy.

Point is, he was going to leave Tommy behind. Out of sight, out mind. He was happy with that. Perfectly content and not at all upset about it or wishing it was different, because that would imply that he was wrong to do what he did and he wasn't wrong, so there. But now they're—they're brothers again, or something, and they've kind of talked it out, a little, and in his own house, even, him lying on the bed injured and almost incoherent and Tommy perched on an emerald block and glaring for all he was worth. They sort of talked. They sort of apologized. Techno sees that there are certain areas where maybe, *potentially*, he may have been a little bit—not quite correct.

And Tommy keeps showing up on his property and building dirt penises. Testing to see how far he can push it. Push him.

"Have you considered talking to him?" Phil asks, leaning against the bridge that connects their houses. Phil has a place of his own now. It's both good and not. Techno likes to keep him close. But sometimes it's too close. Like now. Now is too close. He doesn't want to talk about this. At all. Especially not with Chat caterwauling like they have been.

"Okay, but consider, how about I don't ever, and we leave it at that," he says.

"He's your brother," Phil says.

"And he's your son," he returns, and nearly flinches at the expression that comes across Phil's face at that.

"I'm trying," Phil says flatly. "I go visit. I have dinner. I try to have conversations. I spend time with him when he'll let me. I'm trying to make it up to him, Techno. I don't—I don't regret what we did, exactly, but I don't want to hurt him anymore than we already have. I'm trying to be a better parent."

“*We* already have?” he says, strained. They’ve gone through this already. Used to be that Phil agreed with him on this front. Not anymore. It makes him uncomfortable, arguing with Phil over something like this. Like the world’s off balance. “How about what *he* has? He betrayed us, Phil, betrayed *me*. They both—”

He cuts off. Wilbur’s a whole different can of worms. How is it, he wonders, that he can care about somebody so much and yet still be torn as to whether he wants anything to do with them?

Even that’s not quite right. He remembers the aftermath of that final day. Of finding Wilbur covered in his own blood, woozy and barely sensible. Not knowing for sure whether he’d pull through. Chat was distraught at the possibility of losing him again.

And he was too.

Feelings suck. He’d like a refund on his.

“I know he hurt you, Techno,” Phil says. “I know. But I honestly think that there’s some things that we don’t know about.”

“And that makes it better?” he demands.

“I don’t *know*,” Phil says. “I don’t fucking know, Techno. But at the very least, it means that we’ve got to try and figure this out. And I don’t know about you, but I’d kind of fucking like to have all of my sons safe and sound and home.”

Safe and sound and home. He’s safe and sound and home for now. But people could come here, could break his safety and ruin his home. It’s happened before. How long can this bout of retirement truly last?

Even still, Phil says the words, and something about them tugs at him. Because he doesn’t think that Phil means them in the way of maintaining the status quo. Phil says *safe and sound and home*, and Technoblade thinks of a different server and a time long ago, a little cottage in the trees where the Angel of Death settled down and took in children, one after the other after the other. He was first, and Wilbur soon after, and last of all Tommy, and there were a lot of years where they were happy, before he left for tournaments, before he and Phil decided to conquer a world to prove a point, before the bonds that held them all together started splintering, fracturing.

Before Tommy called him for help, and he found a ravine and too much despair for comfort, a three-life server and both of his brothers down to their final chances.

Was he used, or was he just relied on, trusted? Was he misled, betrayed, or did he just not listen closely enough?

These are questions he’d rather not answer. He’s content out here in the snow, with Phil and Phil alone. Except Tommy keeps building dirt penises in his yard, and he’s getting close to the uncomfortable realization that he doesn’t hate that nearly as much as he pretends to.

Which would imply that he'd actually like Tommy around, despite everything. Which would be a stupid idea, and not one that he ever wants to let Chat hear, but—

He doesn't know who he's fooling, really. Not even himself, at this point. He died for the kid. Of course he wants him around. A world without Tommy is—is a lot worse than he thought it would be, and that was just when they weren't speaking.

He doesn't want to go back to that.

But at the same time—feelings. Not his strong suit. How does he even get a clue as to where to start?

Because he is incredibly smooth and competent, he decides to go around the problem. This means confronting a different problem, but at this point, there's too many problems to not bump into one. And he's probably being a little uncharitable describing this as a problem anyway.

"You're being stupid," Wilbur informs him. Techno shifts uncomfortably in his chair. It's not a very good chair. He's pretty sure that Wilbur built it himself; he's been experimenting with things like that lately. But while Wilbur can build decently well—not that you'd know it, looking at his current disaster of a house—he's not a woodworker. Furniture might be beyond his capacity.

"Wow," he says. "Thank you so much for your wisdom. This is exactly what I came here to hear. I'm so thankful. What else have you got?"

Wilbur sits in the seat across from him, and then pretends that he doesn't startle at the sudden jerking of his chair. The legs are uneven. Techno sees right through him. And Wilbur can tell that he sees right through him, because he scowls and pushes a steaming mug of tea across the table at him.

"I prefer coffee," he says dryly.

"No you don't," Wilbur says, "you fucking liar. Drink your tea."

Wilbur's got him there. He takes a sip of the tea. It's not the best tea he's ever had, but he supposes it's not the worst.

"Your problem, Technoblade," Wilbur says, "is that you're not putting in the work."

"Heh?"

"You distance yourself," Wilbur says. "You barely come by. Tommy says you've stopped by the hotel a grand total of once."

"And you're suddenly an expert on this kind of thing?" he asks. He doesn't bother to keep the snappishness from his tone. Chat is a mixture of *Ls* and *he might have a point* and *what a hypocrite*. "You wanna talk to me about distancin' yourself? Really? I'm kinda amazed that you think you've got a leg to stand on, here."

Wilbur flushes. “I’m trying not to,” he snaps. “I’m trying—and it’s fucking *hard*. I’m not trying to tell you that it’s not fucking hard. And I know you—I know you’ve been hurt. I know you’ve been hurt, and I know that I’ve hurt you. And Tommy’s hurt you, and everyone’s fucking hurt everyone else. But that’s the thing, Techno, you’re not the only one that’s hurt. Tommy’s been hurt, too. And he’s trying to reach out to you, we all are, but nothing’s ever going to change if you don’t let it. And you don’t even—you don’t even fucking have to. If you don’t want anything to do with us, then fucking say so. But say so, and have done with it.”

By the end of that little speech, Wilbur’s chest is heaving. Seems he’s managed to actually step on one of his buttons, here. There’s a gleam in his eyes that speaks to, potentially, a not-great day, headwise. Wilbur has those, and plenty of them, though he mostly knows that from Phil rather than experience.

Maybe he has been distancing himself. Maybe that’s true. But it’s the best form of protection he has.

From the way Wilbur is staring at him, angry and challenging, Wilbur seems to know that.

“The last time Tommy reached out to me,” he says, “it didn’t go so great.”

Wilbur draws in a breath. For a moment, he wonders if that was a line he shouldn’t have crossed. But he was vague, so it’s fine, right? He doesn’t want to get into specifics. Not about that. That’s not the sort of thing he can just ask. *Hey, Wilbur, so how long exactly were you feeling suicidal and why didn’t I notice enough to do something about it?* Yeah, no. Absolutely not. And Wilbur probably wouldn’t appreciate that either. Talking about stuff like that isn’t what they do.

Maybe they should. But there’s no way he’s broaching that yet. One emotional issue at a time. He’ll be lucky if he can learn how to handle that much.

“I never took you for a coward,” Wilbur says.

“If I’m a coward, what does that make you?” It’s only after he says it that he realizes how it could be interpreted. It’s a barb, but it’s not supposed to be about *that*. So he clears his throat, and adds, “About this whole Tommy thing, I mean. You’ve shut him out before.”

“I shut all of you out,” Wilbur says. “Sometimes I still do it. Sometimes, Techno, when someone talks to me, I want to do nothing more than scream at them until they leave me be and let me wallow in my failures. But I’m trying *not* to, and that’s the whole point.” He pauses. “Out of all of us, Tommy is the bravest. You know that, don’t you? All the rest of us destroyed his home, time after time, and he still wants us to be his family. He’s still trying, harder than any of us.”

He bites back the old argument. *L’Manberg needed to go*. Somehow, this doesn’t feel like the time.

“He loved that place,” Wilbur continues. “He loved it, and—and I’m remembering what it was like, to love it, too. And somehow, he still loves the rest of us, even though we took it

from him.”

“It was for the best,” he says.

“I don’t think that it was, anymore,” Wilbur says. “But I’m not looking to argue about that.”

“Neither am I,” he says.

For a moment, neither of them speak. Techno takes another sip of his tea. It’s seriously not all that good. But it’s passable, and maybe it doesn’t need to be good. Maybe it’s enough that Wilbur’s made him tea, and he’s here to drink it.

And then, Wilbur sighs.

“Do you remember,” he says, “how I used to say that we were twins?”

“Yeah,” Techno answers, furrowing his brow. Chat, predictably, breaks out into a flurry of *awww* and *twin headcanon real???* “And I remember sayin’ that that’s not how that works. You can’t just decide that you’re twins with somebody.”

“But I did,” Wilbur says, as if it’s as simple as that. “It worked out fine, for a while. You didn’t hate it—shut up, I know you didn’t. I know what it’s like when you really hate something. You didn’t hate it.”

“Maybe I didn’t,” he says. “So?” There is a fragile, fluttering sort of feeling in the hollow of his throat. Like a butterfly, trapped there, impossible to free without crushing a wing. He remembers those days all too well. He remembers the moment he decided that yes, the weird kid that Phil brought home could be his brother after all. He remembers Wilbur’s insistence on their twin status, and a loyalty between them he thought would never fade.

Is there anything of it still there?

“Do you still want it, Techno?” Wilbur asks. “Do you want to stay brothers? Because I do. And you know how I am about letting things go.” There is a smile on his face, grim and unamused. Maybe self-deprecating. It’s a familiar expression, from Pogtopia, and he has a better idea, now, of what it means.

Leave it to Wilbur to ask him a question like that. As if it’s fair.

But it’s not as if he doesn’t know the answer.

Wilbur is not quite Icarus; Icarus did not have a death-wish, and he did not come back after the sea swallowed him whole. Wilbur is not quite Orpheus; Orpheus did not try again after he failed to sing the world the way he wanted it. Wilbur has never fit the figure of Achilles, and Tubbo makes a far better Patroclus, and he assigned the title of Theseus a long time ago.

But life is not a story. The ancient myths inform, and in some ways, they repeat. But the only vitality they have is the life that is given to them, and Wilbur is more real than any tragic protagonist.

“Well,” he says, “I guess I can’t say that I don’t. You know it’s not that simple, though.”

By his standards, that’s a heavy admission. Wilbur regards him, and then nods, a flicker of satisfaction in the corner of his lips.

“I know. But that’s all I need,” Wilbur says. “Go talk to Tommy. Just go—don’t fucking look at me like that, just talk to him. Try to have an actual conversation. He’s reaching out, but if you’re serious, you need to meet him halfway. This is gonna—this takes all of us, man. If we’re gonna make this work, it takes all of us. And I know you don’t know how, but I don’t either, so it’s just—it’s just about trying, yeah?”

“I think that might be the corniest thing you’ve ever said to me,” he says, past the sudden lump in his throat. He’s not emotional about this. This is not upsetting to him. No matter what Chat is yelling at him. He is the picture of stoicism. Wilbur’s words aren’t sinking in, and he’s not being forced to confront the fact that yes, he actually does care whether he has brothers or not.

Wilbur pulls a face.

“I’m not *corny*,” he says. “I am dramatic and eloquent. Just because you have no taste or recognition of well-developed rhetoric doesn’t mean that I’m corny.”

“I am almost certain you aren’t using those words properly,” he says, and considers. “Alright. Say I talk to him. Say he talks to me. If you’re so wise, tell me where to go from there.”

Wilbur shrugs, leaning back. “That’s up to you,” he says. “I can’t do this for you. I can’t mend bridges that aren’t mine to mend.”

“Great,” he says. That’s his cue to leave, he’s pretty sure. He rises from his chair. “Thank you. That’s so helpful. Has anyone ever told you how helpful you are.”

“All the time,” Wilbur says.

He hesitates by the door. Looks back, meets Wilbur’s eyes.

“Bein’ twins isn’t so bad,” he admits. “I’m—look, I’m gonna deny ever havin’ said this, but I did potentially miss you. Despite everythin’. Even when I was tellin’ myself I didn’t. So I’m glad you’re still here.” And when Wilbur opens his mouth, he raises his hands, because that—that was awkward, and he’d like to move on from this right now, actually. “No, don’t, we are not makin’ this a thing. I just thought you should know. That’s all. I am out of here.”

“I know,” Wilbur says, softly. “I did figure that much out for myself. But thank you, Techno. For saying it.”

He blinks. Chat goes haywire.

“Definitely out of here,” he says, and leaves. That’s enough of that.

he’s crying now, someone in Chat informs him.

“Yeah,” he says. He blinks a bit of rain from his eyes, and glances up at the sunny sky. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Okay. Do you all wanna go talk to Tommy? I guess we’re gonna go talk to Tommy. Ten bucks says the child tries to murder us in an unbelievably inefficient way.”

Chat erupts. He heads for the hotel. Better to do this sooner rather than later.

And better not to admit that he feels lighter than he has in a long time.

vi.

No parent should have to bury their child. But Philza has, and still does, and it is difficult to break the habit.

Wilbur is here, now. Wilbur is here, now, and he is going to remain so. Phil has watched the light slowly return to his eyes, despite all the days when it seems to vanish, when he turns colder, crueler, or so hot that he threatens to burn himself up, or when he can’t manage to get out of bed at all. There are many of those days, but there are also far better ones, and Wilbur is getting better.

It turns out that returning to life is a slow process, in the end.

The problem he is left with is this: there was something to get better from.

He remembers his first step into the server. He remembers tearing at the code, hacking at it until it let him in, accepted his presence as if he was supposed to be there. He remembers alighting on cold, hard stone, his crows outside screeching loudly enough to hear, even then. He remembers the first look he’d had of his son in months, remembers that his first thought was *gods, he’s so tired*.

He remembers the moment, even if he’d prefer not to. He remembers just how much force he had to apply. He remembers how warm Wilbur’s blood was as it covered his arms. He remembers that the last expression on his face was one of relief, pure and uncomplicated, before all the life faded from it, and Phil sat there waiting for a respawn that never came.

And then there was the aftermath. The cleanup. The way the server welcomed him with open arms. And with that, he drew the only conclusion that he could: that Wilbur was gone. That the Wilbur he knew had already been dead, long before he arrived. Because if he hadn’t been, then surely people would have been upset with him for killing him. Surely there would have been a funeral, at the very least. Surely, some kind of retribution. But there wasn’t. Not for that.

The man he killed was dangerous, and he’d just destroyed everyone’s home, and it was easy to justify it to himself. He mourned his son, and reasoned that he had no choice but to do

what he did. And every night, he dreamed of killing him again, and he woke up with tears on his face and empty hands and wings that always hurt but would never again take to the air.

He still dreams.

He still dreams, and he always will, and there is always some part of him that is burying his child.

The question, when it finally comes, does not do so from the direction he expects.

“So why *did* you do it?” Tubbo asks. Tubbo’s not here to see him, but rather to visit Ranboo. The two have been close lately, and Phil’s glad that the kid is getting out more. But Tubbo’s stopped by for a quick chat on his way out, and they’re standing on the bridge that connects his new house to Techno’s, and for a long moment, he has absolutely no idea what Tubbo is asking.

But Tubbo brushes his hair out of his eyes, meets his gaze with a squareness that takes him aback, a bit, and repeats the question.

“Why did you do it?” he asks. “Kill Wilbur, I mean. It’s been bothering me for a while. I guess you don’t have to answer if it’s too touchy, but I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and it seems like he really didn’t need to die.”

He swallows. When he answers, his voice is light, even. He has never regarded Tubbo as a threat. Not to him. Only once to Techno, and that was resolved fairly quickly. Tubbo is not a threat.

“He asked,” he answers, quietly. “Begged, really.”

“I know that part,” Tubbo says. “Or I mean, I know it now. Didn’t, back then. I know he was suicidal, but see, he’s not anymore, mostly. He’s getting a lot better, and you know, I can tell that he’s also trying not to be a dick, so that’s nice too, but that’s not what I’m trying to get at here, Phil. See, I know he wanted to die, but that doesn’t really explain why you killed him. Because it seems to me that you shouldn’t kill somebody just because they asked you to.”

“What, you should only kill the people who *aren’t* asking you to?” he says, and tries to laugh. Tubbo doesn’t laugh.

“Maybe you shouldn’t kill people at all, unless you have to,” Tubbo says, and his laughter, already uneasy, curls up and dies in his throat.

“Alright, that’s a fair point,” he says, even though he doesn’t know that he can agree. Death’s an old friend, to him, and more than that. “You know how it was, Tubbo. He’d just blown up L’Manberg. He’d destroyed everything he’d built, destroyed all of your homes, almost killed people. Gods know I’ve regretted it ever since, but I didn’t feel that I had a choice in the moment.”

“Mm.” Tubbo glances away, and then back. “You know, Phil, if it had been anyone else in that room, I think Wilbur might have lived.”

The words hang in the air, and in a way, they hang him, too.

He draws in a breath, and then another, finding the first one inadequate.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Tubbo says. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Wilbur—intended himself to die in the explosion, right? And then you shielded him, and you lost your wings, but someone else probably could’ve yanked him back. And then, none of the rest of us would’ve killed him, no matter what he’d done, because he was our friend. Maybe we wouldn’t have understood. And maybe Wilbur wouldn’t have let us try. But we wouldn’t have killed him.” His lips twist. The worst part is that none of his words land maliciously, or even with anger. Just thoughtfully. “Maybe Dream would’ve. But Dream liked to be able to hold people over other people’s heads, so I think that maybe even he wouldn’t have.”

Another breath. A fourth.

“Are you saying I’m worse than *Dream*?” It comes out a strangled rasp, and Tubbo looks startled.

“What? No, that’s not what I’m saying. Sorry, no. But I am saying that I don’t get it. The real reason why you killed him.”

His jaw works. He’s back in the button room, thinking *gods, he’s so tired*. The world is exploding, and he’s thinking, *have to protect him have to save him*. He’s standing in the rubble, mistaking Wilbur’s self-hatred for joy, thinking *this can’t be my son*.

He’s lived long enough to see death as something of a solution.

Two strikes. And here is the truth: they both came so much more easily than they should have.

“You’ve thought about this a lot,” he says. His voice comes out old. And tired. His wings ache acutely. He’s not hiding them at the moment, has stopped feeling like he needs to at every second of the day, but right now, the urge to find a cloak to cover himself with is very strong. Their tattered condition feels like only shame, feels like a whisper of *you saved your son only to kill him, and this is what you’re left with*.

The whisper sounds like the Egg, the one time it spoke to him. *Join me, and you will fly again. Join me, and I will make your family whole.*

Join me, and you will regain everything that you so foolishly lost.

“I’ve had time on my hands,” Tubbo agrees. “And you know, was a time when I wouldn’t have bothered saying anything. Better not to stir up the hornet’s nest, y’know? But Wilbur’s back and here to stay. And we’re all supposedly friends again, or something.” Doubt drips from his tone. “So I’d really just like to know, if you’d be willing to share.”

He inhales. Still not enough air. The cold whips into his lungs and then back out again, but he feels colder than ever before.

“Some of the time, I don’t know myself.” He pauses, waits, but Tubbo says nothing, so he goes on, each word more reluctant than the last. “I got there, I had—the vaguest fucking idea of what was going on, all the crows were yelling at me about Wilbur blowing up a country. And then I got there, and that’s what he did. He fucking did it. He destroyed it, and he laughed, like it was a triumph.”

He knows, now, what it stemmed from. He knows what he didn’t before. What he refused to see. Willful blindness.

“And then?” Tubbo says. Voice blank. Somehow, Phil knows that there is nothing he can say to get him to stop asking.

He has never regarded Tubbo as a threat.

“I didn’t recognize him,” he says. “I didn’t understand him. I looked at him and couldn’t see my son. I didn’t understand, so I—I made a split-second decision. And I’ve regretted it ever since.”

Tubbo leans against the railing. He seems at home in the snow. His coat has some wear to it.

“So you think you made the wrong choice, then?” he says, and Phil jolts.

“Of course I did,” he snaps. “You think I would’ve tried to bring him back if I thought killing my son had been the right decision?”

Tubbo shrugs. “People on this server do a lot of stupid shit all the time,” he says. “And you’re confusing. I’ve never known if the lesson you were trying to teach us by destroying L’Manberg was the one that actually stuck.”

He blinks, trying to keep up with the sudden reference. But before he can figure out how to respond to that—and he doesn’t know how he’d respond to that, really, because he used to be so sure that he was right about it, so sure that the server would be better if only L’Manberg and its attachment to power and its corrupting influence was gone, but considering how things happened afterward, maybe *not*—Tubbo speaks again.

“You thought he was a different person,” he says. “I get that. I sort of thought like that too. We all did. Because we didn’t understand why he was acting that way all of a sudden. Tommy was the closest out of all of us, and even he didn’t quite know what to do, even if he never gave up. So it was sort of easier, to think that Wilbur was great and then he was a dick and then he was gone. But, y’know, it’s not like there were different versions of him or anything. It’s all just Wilbur. People are complicated.”

There is a surprising lack of judgment in his tone. Incrementally, Phil feels himself relax, a weariness sweeping through him. He steps up next to Tubbo, leaning on the rail beside him, staring out at the snow. There is a thick forest doing its level best to grow in front of the houses—more quickly than is natural, he thinks.

“People are complicated,” he agrees. “And sometimes we think they’re different than they are. And so they have hurts that you never know are there. Not until it’s too late, and you’ve

handled it in the worst possible way.”

“I guess the only thing to do is be better about it in the future,” Tubbo says.

“That’s the plan,” he says. “For as long as he’ll let me.”

“Well, from what I hear, he’s sticking around,” Tubbo says. “And so are the rest of us. Maybe not here, though. I like my own snowy place better. Mess with it and I’ll kill you, by the way.”

“Uh—”

“I should probably be going, actually,” Tubbo says, straightening and moving for the stairs, a spring in his step. “Oh, and I wanted to let you know that Ranboo and I might be getting married for tax benefits. Just so you know. We’ll get the word out if we decide to go for it. See you around, Phil.”

And before he has time to so much as process that information, or recover from the tonal whiplash, Tubbo is heading out across the snow and toward the nether portal with the confidence of one who is used to the climate.

So that is that, really.

The conversation lingers, replays in the edges of his mind each and every time he goes to see his son. Any of them, really, but mostly Wilbur; he is beginning to understand that his mistakes with Tommy lie in a completely different area. For Wilbur, though, it is the pain of looking at him and realizing that in some ways, he is a stranger, not through anything that he has done, but because there are aspects of him that Phil has never looked hard enough to know, never known were there in the first place. Never considered could be there.

His son was in pain, and he never knew. And that is something he must accept. Must live with.

His son was in pain, and he killed him instead of helping him. That, too, is something he must accept. And even still, even now, there is some part of him that is burying the child he once knew, each and every day.

So here is the truth, inexorable and unavoidable: he failed his son. Failed him in the worst possible way. And he knows it. He has spent so much time trying not to know it, trying not to so much as grieve, because for all his long centuries, he has never quite learned how to do that right. He failed at that too, of course. And L’Manberg—L’Manberg was a lesson, and L’Manberg was also a convenient target. Something to blame. Something to use to redirect all his shame and self-loathing outward. An explanation, something to point at and say *yes, this is why Wilbur is gone, this corrupt attachment, this is bad, so if it goes, everything will be alright again.*

It didn’t quite work. He failed. He knows he failed. He will never be able to forget it.

But his child is here, as he feared he never would be again. His child is here, and there is so much about his son that he does not know, but he is going to get the chance to learn, to learn and understand as he feared he never would. He gets to be there, to be there as Wilbur tends to a field of flowers with a smile on his face, as Wilbur retreats into himself and lashes out and turns bitter and angry on the days that don't go right, as Wilbur opens up and shows more vulnerability than Phil has seen from him in a very long time—and isn't that an unwelcome surprise, to know that his son has been hiding himself away for far longer than he thought?

But he is glad to be here. By all the gods he knows and by his Lady herself, he is glad to be here. To have this. This house by the sea, ramshackle and the ugliest fucking building he's ever seen, this hotel on the path that Tommy and Wilbur are both so excited about, these dinners and these stories and the slow and steady recovery of the passion and the light and the zeal that Wilbur once carried so very easily.

And sometimes Wilbur will turn his head, and the stars will catch on the white in his hair, or he'll tilt his head as if listening to music that no one else can hear, and Phil is reminded, suddenly and forcefully, that Wilbur has spoken to the infinite universe and been found loved, and that there is something of the universe in him still, something *other* that lingers in the pitch of his voice or the shadow of his movement. But to be other in this way is not to be less human, but more; it is human to love and be loved, and the universe loves deeply and absolutely.

Phil is only glad to see Wilbur love and be loved again. He is glad to see his son learn how to live again. He failed, but he does not have to fail forever.

His wings ache most days, but it is easier and easier not to mind.

vii.

The summary of it is this: Tommy is going to scam so many people.

The summary of it is also this: Tommy is building a hotel, and for the first time in a very, very long while, he's daring to hope that he's making something that won't be taken from him.

The building process is good. Fun, even, not that he would say as much out loud to Sam, the bastard. Sam thinks it's funny to do the Sam Nook bit, to send him scampering off after materials, so Tommy would literally rather die—except not literally at all, no thank you—than let him know that he is correct, actually, and that he himself is having a very good time with this. It's relaxing, is the thing, getting all this stuff. It's low stakes, and it gives him a sense of accomplishment whenever Sam tells him he's done a good job.

Privately, he thinks that this just might be good for Sam as well. He's so much less of a dickhead than he used to be, when he had to run the prison, and there aren't such deep bags under his eyes. So really, Tommy is the one doing Sam a favor here. He'll have to remind him of that.

So, the summary of it could go like this: Tommy is building a hotel with the help of his good friend Sam, and also lots of other people who stop by, and it is going to be big and red and the best hotel that this server has ever seen, and he will run it and be the best businessman that this server has ever seen—not that there's a lot of competition there, since Schlatt was a dumbass who did drugs all of the time, and not of the potion variety, and Tommy hates him even if he did save Wilbur's life, so there—and he is simply going to take everybody's diamonds. Then he will be rich and fawned over, and everyone will tell him that he is a big man and so very cool and no one will hurt him, because everything's good and they're all friends again and the server is nice and Dream has fucked off somewhere very far away where he can be a sad little god or whatever the fuck and not bother him about it.

That's the summary. Here's one of the particulars: he doesn't know how to treat his best friend.

This is a continuing problem, he'll admit. Nothing's been the same since—exile. Or even since Manberg days, really, the first separation. But it's even more clear now than it used to be, because it used to be that he'd be pulling off something like this hotel and Tubbo would be right by his side, but Tubbo isn't. Tubbo's got a place of his own, now, and Tommy could join but doesn't particularly want to, which means that Tubbo is often doing his own thing, without him. Which is fine. He doesn't need Tubbo hanging around all the time and being a clingy little bitch.

But there's a problem with that, and the problem is that Tubbo tried to die for him. Again.

Whenever he sees Tubbo, he sees it. Sees Jack Manifold lunging for him. Hears the little voice in his head, the one that sounds like him but sometimes also sounds like Dream, saying that he'd deserve it, maybe, if Jack Manifold's hit landed home, because he never takes responsibility, is always so ungrateful. And then, he sees Tubbo jumping in the way, a spray of too much blood, Jack Manifold's face crumbling, paling, and then a flash of gold, brilliant and bright, and a crashing noise as death opened its gates long enough for Tubbo to slip back through.

If Wilbur hadn't tossed back that totem—almost dying himself, the prick, but that's a whole other thing—and if Tubbo hadn't picked it up, he would have died. And he would have died for him. Jack and Niki were trying to kill him. Not Tubbo.

It's too much. He can't stand it. The thought of Tubbo dying for him. There've been too many near misses.

And that means he doesn't know how to treat him. On one hand, he doesn't like it, doesn't like this drifting they've been doing, doesn't like growing apart from each other like they have because Tubbo is his best friend in any world and he never, ever wants that to change. But at the same time, he doesn't want Tubbo to die for him. There's no reason to think that he will, of course, now that the server's got its shit together, but he can't stop thinking about it.

So eventually, he decides to bring it up. Not without a good bit of trepidation; there's a large part of him that struggles, a lot, with sharing any kind of genuine feeling, because that's the sort of shit that always got him in trouble with Dream, and even now there's still some days where he gets mixed up in his head about what he's allowed and what he isn't allowed. Dream didn't like it when he wanted things, and this definitely qualifies as wanting things. But this is Tubbo, and Dream's far away and supposedly not corrupted anymore or whatever the fuck, so he's safe to do this.

And he should bring it up, really. It's for Tubbo's own good as much as his.

"Tubbo," he starts. It's a very strong start if he does say so himself. "You'd never—I mean, you'd never really die for me, would you?"

Best to be direct.

Tubbo stumbles, and it is very lucky that he's not near the edge of the roof. Or what's passing for the edge of the roof right now. They're laying stone to finish this layer, and Tommy only waited until they were up here to start talking because Sam's doing something down below, and this isn't really a conversation that he wants Sam to butt in on.

"What?" Tubbo says.

"Well, it's only that you've sort of tried to do that twice now," he says. "And you see, that'd be wrong of you, in my opinion. Because Tubbo, I know we've been through this, but maybe it didn't stick, because you tried to do it again with the Egg, and I'd really, really rather you not do that, alright?"

"I'm not—" Tubbo stops, blinking, and turns to face him full-on. "It's not like I'm trying to die. I'm just trying to stop you from dying."

"Okay, that's good, I'm definitely—it's very good of you, Tubbo, thank you," he says. "I don't want to die, so that's rather good. But I also would very much like it if you didn't die, and if you did, I feel like you should know that I would be very upset, and you should really consider me a little bit more when you go and make decisions about it."

"I do consider you," Tubbo says. "I consider how I don't want you to die."

"Okay, well, instead of considering that, you could consider about how you live in a little village all by yourself and we don't really—I mean, we do, we see each other a lot, but I think maybe it's not as often as it could be. Or how it used to be."

"Oh," Tubbo says. "I didn't think you minded."

That throws him for a bit of a loop.

"You didn't think I minded?" he says. "Tubbo. I feel like—" Fuck. Does he go for the emotional admission? That's not so much his style. But then again, emotional admissions tend to be more helpful than he expects; they've had good results with Wilbur. Puffy would

probably roll her eyes and say *yes, Tommy, good communication skills do tend to help, stop getting in your own way.*

Emotion it is. He only gives himself a split second of hesitation before going on.

“I feel like I’m losing my best friend, and you didn’t think I minded?”

Very embarrassingly, his voice cracks on the last word. He’ll have to hope that Tubbo will chalk it up to a dry throat, or something.

Judging by the look on Tubbo’s face, he is not chalking it up to a dry throat, or something.

“You’re not losing me,” Tubbo says. “Why would you think you’re losing me?”

“Because—” He has to stop and start again. “Because, it’s obvious, innit? You’ve been moving on to different things, and I’ve just been staying here the same. And it’s not—I don’t want to hold you *back*, Tubbo, but I don’t—we’re supposed to stay best friends forever. I don’t want that to change. And you can—you *can* leave, if you want, and I won’t even care because you’re clingy as fuck and I need some breathing room, so you can, but—but maybe I don’t want you to.”

“Oh,” Tubbo says again. This time, he takes a step closer. Tommy doesn’t; he’s rooted to the spot, to the stone that he’s just laid down on what will someday be another level of his hotel. “I—I didn’t realize you felt that way, Tommy.”

Tubbo’s voice trembles a bit, too. It makes him feel marginally better.

“It’s not,” Tubbo continues, “I mean, it’s not that I’m leaving you. I’m not trying to leave you. Of course we’re still best friends. It’s just, I have things that I’m doing, and the server has changed, you know? It’s changed a lot. There’s Snowchester, and the Egg’s gone now, and people live in a lot of different places, and Wilbur’s back, and Ranboo and I are thinking about—actually, I’ll tell you that later. But the point is, things are changing, but that doesn’t have to be bad.”

“I don’t like it when things change,” he says, because most changes in his life have only been bad. The election was bad. The time of New L’Manberg was bad, for him at least. Wilbur coming back was good, but it was almost very, very bad at several points. And the thing is, most changes seem to go hand in hand with people leaving, finding somewhere else to be, and he’s still here in the house he dug out from the hill at the very start, and if this goes on for any longer, he’s going to be left all alone.

“I know,” Tubbo says. “But we’re changing too. Neither of us are the same as we started out. But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. We’ll figure it out.” Tubbo takes another step forward, and another, closing the gap between them. “Things being different doesn’t mean that we’re not still going to be best friends.” He huffs out a little laugh. “And I promise to do my best not to die for you, alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, alright,” he says. “It just—it fucked with my head, right? You can’t die, I—” No. No, he’s going to say it. He needs to say it. “I need you, Tubbo, really.”

“Aw, I love you too, Tommy,” Tubbo says, the absolute bastard, and then he goes on to say, “You do realize that this definitely means you’re the clingy one, out of the two of us,” and well, that’s enough of that.

Tommy pushes him off the roof. But there’s water at the bottom, so he’s alright in the end.

So there’s one of the particulars: he’s building a hotel, and Tubbo is his best friend, and no matter what else is going to change, that won’t. No matter what they have to do, they’ll have each other.

It’s a fair point, about changing. Tommy knows he’s a different person. A lot of the time, he doesn’t quite like the person he is. Sometimes Dream’s voice rings in his head, and he goes quiet, or starts—starts trying to *suck up* to whoever he’s around, and sometimes he can’t be near fire, and sometimes he’ll look at water and his throat will close up and it’ll be like he’s drowning again, waking up with the waves closed over his head, and sometimes, he knows he’s far meaner than he ought to be, because he can’t help himself, can’t help the urge to lash out and to push at people’s boundaries, to see just how much it would take for them to be mean right back.

The hotel helps. Sam helps; Sam never pushes back, no matter what he does. Puffy helps; Puffy doesn’t ever yell, or even get angry, just explaining why he shouldn’t do a thing he just did. And when she does that, it’s easy for him to pull himself together again.

His friends help. Tubbo. Even Ranboo, the fucker. Though he knows they don’t quite understand. He’s glad about that. He doesn’t understand himself, a lot of the time, and he certainly doesn’t want *them* to.

Phil—Phil is admittedly not that great of a help with this, but that’s mostly because Phil only knows the bare bones, like most people, and Phil is very, very old, and he thinks that Phil wants to help but never quite knows how. For the moment, it’s enough that they’re trying to be a family again—not that he’d tell the old man as much. But he missed having a dad. And he knows Phil would protect him, if it came down to it, and that’s the most important thing.

Techno’s weird. Techno shows up sometimes, all awkward and shit, and they talk, or they just do something in the same area, and Techno always seems content with that. But it’s—something. It’s reaching out. He doesn’t know if it’s forgiveness or not, but maybe it’s something like it. He has a feeling they’re going to end up alright, which is good, because he never liked only having one brother, even if having none was worse.

But when the nights in his hill-home get a little too lonely, or he knows he won’t be able to sleep without nightmares, it’s Wilbur’s house that he goes to, Wilbur’s—frankly gorgeous-looking, because of course it is, because he helped so very much—house by the sea. Friend roves around in the surrounding hills, and Tommy twines his hand through the wool and just breathes for a while, and then he goes inside, and—

That’s different, too. They’re different than how they used to be. Wilbur is, in his mind, like a photograph. One that was faded, and maybe torn, and perhaps even splattered with ink or soaked with rain or splattered with a bit of blood. But now the photograph has been restored, and restored more fully than it ever was at the start, so he can see little details that he never

noticed before, little things that make up the whole that were hidden, little things that make it all a lot more imperfect, and somehow more real.

Here's another particular, though not about the hotel: he's not ever going to be able to look up to Wilbur like he used to.

But the thing about that is that it's a good thing. Everything about the Wilbur he practically worshiped still exists in the Wilbur that sits in front of him now, all the ideas and the passion and the drive, even if some days Wilbur can't reach them. That always frustrates him, Tommy can tell. But brains do fucky things, and Wilbur's brain, as it turns out, is fuckier than most.

The rest of it's there, too. The flashes of paranoia, far less now, but present. The dickish tendencies, which, Tommy knew those were there all along, they just got worse at a certain point. But more than that, there's the weariness, the days when Wilbur can barely manage to lift his head up, the days where he seems to spiral away from himself. Not every day is a good day, even if more and more of them are.

It's not as if that makes Wilbur any less worthy of being looked up to. And Tommy still looks up to him—a *lot*. But the point is that it's not the same. Tommy's not looking up to the ideal of Wilbur that he once had, the Wilbur who always knew what to do and always had an idea or a scheme and led their country with confidence and skill and never, ever seemed to flag. Because he knows now that none of that was true. He'd be lying if he said there wasn't any sense of betrayal about that.

Turns out that Wilbur was a fallible human all along.

Things are the same, too, in a lot of ways. The old familiarity was quick to return. And Wilbur's made up for what he did, is still making up for it. He wants to be better, and that's all that Tommy has ever needed, in order to stay. More, even. He thinks, though, that there's a large part of Wilbur that's relieved to not be in charge anymore, so Tommy's not going to say that he still looks up to him, just a little bit more than the average younger brother should look up to the average older brother—not that he's average, mind, as he is above average in everything he does, and he supposes Wilbur's alright, too.

The real reason he looks up to Wilbur now is that Wilbur decided to stay.

Tommy is never going to tell Wilbur about the pillar. Not in so many words. He will never take Wilbur to Logstedshire. He barely remembers the pillar himself, if he's being honest. But he knows what it's like to tower up. To have the option laid out in front of you. Rock bottom, or rather, the height limit. Nowhere to go but down and down, chased by the knowledge that everything would be so much better if only you jumped.

Wilbur built another tower of his own. And this time, he chose to land in water.

Wilbur chose to stay. He kept the one promise he broke, after all this time. *I'll be right back.*

He came back.

Really, that's all Tommy ever wanted.

"You look like you're thinking deep thoughts," Wilbur says. The stars are bright tonight. They're on the roof of his house. The sea is dark, and for once, looking at it doesn't make Tommy feel like drowning.

"I'm always thinking deep thoughts," he says. "I have so many deep thoughts, you couldn't even comprehend all of them."

Wilbur laughs, high and free. He's got such a stupid fucking laugh. Tommy likes it very much when he can draw one from him.

"Sure you do," Wilbur says. "Don't strain yourself."

"I never strain myself," he says, and when Wilbur reaches out to ruffle his hair, he doesn't duck away. And when he scoots a little closer, leaning into Wilbur's side, Wilbur doesn't comment, just slings an arm around his shoulders and lets him tuck close. Wilbur hums, too; he does that a lot, these days, hums along to some tune that only he and the universe know, and just a couple of days ago, Tommy heard him playing the guitar and was struck by a sudden and inexplicable urge to cry.

"If you say so," Wilbur says. "I had an idea the other day. Would you be interested?"

"Depends," he says. "How cool is it?"

"I want to make something that can fly," Wilbur says. "Something that stays up in the air on its own. Like a hot air balloon—do you know how those work? Probably takes a lot of redstone, but we can get Tubbo in on it, see what he thinks. But it doesn't have to be a balloon. It could just be a—some kind of contraption, I dunno. A flying bike. We could make a flying bike. A bike with, wings and shit. Or something. But I want it to actually fly, not just depend on a potion of levitation or what have you. We could get Phil up in the sky again. We could go touch the stars."

"Be cold, wouldn't it?" he replies, scrunching up his nose.

"You'd think, but they're not at all," Wilbur says. "They're very warm. I don't know if we could actually get close enough, but c'mon, Tommy, the rest of it sounds cool, doesn't it?"

It's been a long time since Wilbur came up with a scheme like this. It reminds him of potions and a drug van, and insisting that brewing stands caused bowel problems. Same kind of harebrained idea. And it's good, because in that moment, so long ago, with the potions and the drug van and before everything else, they were so very happy.

And Wilbur sounds happy. Wilbur doesn't sound like he's trying to prove anything, or make a point, or take on any new responsibility. He sounds like he wants to do something. To create something. To try.

And that's good.

"I suppose," he says, and he's not looking at Wilbur's face, but he can feel his grin.

“Great,” Wilbur says. “Great, that’s really great. Wait until you see what I’m picturing, Tommy. Forget about Dream’s no-fly rule, this is gonna be so fucking good.”

Being here with Wilbur is the warmest Tommy has ever been. Stars or no.

“It’s gonna blow up in your face, probably,” he says, and Wilbur just laughs.

“Maybe,” he says. “But imagine if it works.”

He already can. And the best part is that even if it doesn’t, he thinks that Wilbur will still be happy. Will still stay.

Yes. He’s very warm. And he thinks Wilbur is, too.

“You can park it on top of the hotel,” he murmurs. “Be a—exclusive landing zone. I won’t charge you.”

Again, a laugh. That is what love sounds like.

“Thank you, Tommy,” Wilbur says, and they sit on the roof and watch the stars until Tommy falls asleep.

Wilbur stays awake a little longer. Just long enough for the stars to twinkle and spin and whisper in his mind in their billion-chorus

(you are the night and you are the daylight and you are not alone)

and he knows

(the player was the universe and the player was love)

that a new day is coming. Even now, he has not lost his taste for the sunrise. There are plans in his mind

(plans and no pressure and no desperate urgency, only a desire and a will and it is like some part of him coming home, because he was not created for idleness and there are things to do yet, ideas that call him and music to hear and a future, finally a future, and no, he is not done just yet)

and an itch in his fingers, to draw, to create, to write out all the lines and edges, to map out what comes next, to settle back into doing whatever suits him best in the moment, and that is so many things. There are possibilities, so close that he can taste them. The old drive, the old passion. But he has learned, now, what he needs, and has learned that he does not need to prove.

He does this for himself. For the joy of it. For that intrinsic part of him that always, always wants to do something more, because he can. And he does this for the brightness in Tommy's eyes, and for the opening of doors that Tubbo has shut, and

(he is so ready to be whole, with all of the dangers and all of the risk and all of the joy that comes along with it, he is ready, and he will meet this reclaiming of himself with open arms and fingers that are remembering the callouses that the guitar gave him)

for himself. For himself, too.

The idea will fail, or the idea will not fail, and either way, he will be ready, and he will be here.

Wilbur stays awake a little longer, but soon enough, leaning against Tommy on the ugly cobblestone roof, he falls asleep, too. And in his sleep, there is a song, and he is singing it, and he knows the words at last.

End Notes

It felt a little weird to be writing this fic in povs mostly other than c!Wilbur's, but I wanted to give other characters a chance to continue/resolve their arcs, and to ask some of the questions that *careful son* didn't get the chance to address. My aim was to tie up some of the loose threads I left dangling, so I hope I was able to do that in a somewhat satisfying way.

No idea if there will be a part three in the series or not; I'm keeping the option open, so we'll see. For now, thank you all so much for reading <3

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